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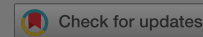
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## Sky and Stardust: The Flying Saucer in American Popular Culture, 1947–1957

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### Introduction

This essay investigates the relationship between the flying saucer within post-war American popular culture and narratives of home, technology, and authority. As an object embodying a specific cultural moment, the flying saucer became a nodal point, a discursive centre, where discussion of aesthetics, power and modernity came together, projected into the minds of Americans via print media, advertisements, songs and material culture. As an alternative focal point of post-war culture to the atomic bomb, blue suede shoes or Marilyn Monroe, the flying saucer was a bright light cast against darkening skies, revealing an American audience looking optimistically towards a utopian future and guardedly back at the massive destruction of twentieth-century global conflict. As a ‘monster,’ this symbol of modernity possessed a certain plasticity of identity, evoking variously and non-linearly feelings of fear and fascination, even playfulness. As an historical object, assessed in relation to technological and social change, the flying saucer eventually became thoroughly domesticated and acclimated within American society. Between Kenneth Arnold’s sighting which sparked national interest in the phenomenon on 24 June 1947 and the launch of Sputnik I on 4 October 1957, over 5,000 flying saucer observations were reported to the United States Air Force (USAF). In 1950, five or six sightings per day were logged,<sup>1</sup> before spiking in 1952, when more flying saucers were spotted ‘than at any time since the initial flood’ in 1947, totalling 1,700.<sup>2</sup> Reports became more sporadic in 1953 when only 429 sightings were received, subsequently declining further to ‘hardly more than a trickle.’<sup>3</sup> Sputnik’s launch saw the flying saucer eclipsed to a degree as the generational other, taking its place within a genealogy of historical threats from above.

### Historiography

The flying saucer has most often been viewed from its role in science fiction and cinema. Works such as M. Keith Booker’s *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction and American Culture*



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1. Drew  
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2. AP, ‘F

st,’ St.

52, p. 1.

3. Arthur Edson (AP), 'It's Summer! That Means It's "Flying Saucer" Time,' *Eugene Register-Guard*, 24 July 1955, p. 7.
4. M. Keith Booker, *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport, CT, 2006).
5. Mark Jancovich, 'Re-Examining 1950s Invasion Narratives,' in *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 26-49.
6. Terry Kirk, 'Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentality,' *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 40 (2008), p. 7.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 8.
9. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 4.
10. Ibid., p. 5.
11. Kirk, 'Monumental Monstrosity,' *Perspecta*, p. 7.
12. Ibid.
13. See also: Jan Bondeson's *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History* (New York, 1999) and James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), Back Cover.
14. See [redacted]
15. Susa [redacted]
16. Ibid.
17. AP, ' [redacted] 5 June 1947. The [redacted] ce, 26 June 1947, p. 1.



18. Ken Hollings, *Welcome to Mars: Fantasies of Science in the American Century, 1947-1959* (London, 2008), p. 15.
19. This is a matter of some dispute. See: <http://ufoupdateslist.com/1999/mar/m17-009.shtml> (UFO Updates, 17 March 1999) – accessed 29 April 2015.
20. 'The Somethings,' *Time*, 14 July 1947.
21. Hollings, *Welcome to Mars*, p. 11.
22. Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York, 2005), p. 2.
23. <http://brain.gallup.com/documents/questionnaire.aspx?STUDY=AIPO0455&p=1> (Gallup Poll asking people about their familiarity with various terms, 28 April 1950, also asked on 23 July 1947, 28 April 1950, 2 May 1950, and 29 August 1952) – accessed 1 August 2014.
24. Edward J. Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects [Henceforth RUFO]* (New York, 1956), p. 5.
25. Cohen, 'Preface: In a Time of Monsters,' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, p. viii.
26. *Ibid.*, p. x.
27. From Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms About Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms' (1987), quoted in Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (Oxon., 2003), p. 111.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Further... was  
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45. Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity*, p. xiii.

46. A Gallup Poll from 1996 revealed that forty-five per cent of those surveyed believed aliens had visited the earth. In 2010, a CBS News poll found thirty per cent believed the same thing. Further, thirty-three per cent believed in ghosts, thirty-seven per cent in haunted houses and twenty-one per cent in witches. Peter Dendle states that 'folklorists and other cultural interpreters of the future will have every right, retrospectively, to say that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries many people still quaintly believed in "monsters", such as Bigfoot, lake monsters, aliens, and ghosts.' (From Peter J. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Asa Simon Mittman (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham, 2012), pp. 442-3).

47. Susan Lepselter, 'The Flight of the Ordinary: Narrative, Poetics, Power and UFOs in the American Uncanny,' PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005, p. x.

48. That the flying saucer was discussed in places such as *Life* should indicate how widely the phenomenon permeated. As a sign of *Life*'s popularity, for example, in 'just thirteen weeks in the early 1950s, over one half of Americans had seen a particular issue.'

49. 'Farmer Trent's Flying Saucer,' *Life*, 26 June 1950, p. 40.

50. 'Flying Saucer,' *Life*, 17 July 1950, p. 12.

51. David

52. Reim

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53. Arth

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54. Re

1952, p.

55. 'Q's

56. Robe



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52, p. 45.

57. There was also perhaps an eagerness to construct what Arnold saw as something it was not, to mould it into a particular and more familiar science-fictional shape. Time's 'The Somethings' article, as if to make the link even more explicit, began with a passage of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898), describing something rushing 'up into the sky and out of the grayness ... very swiftly into the luminous clearness above the clouds ...; something flat and broad, and very large, that swept round in a vast curve' ('The Somethings,' *Time*, 14 July 1947).

58. <http://www.frankwu.com/Paul-8.html> ('Gallery of Frank R. Paul's Science Fiction Artwork') - accessed 29 April 2015.

59. John Block Friedman, 'Foreword,' in Mittman (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, p. xxvi.

60. Mittman, 'Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, pp. 7-8.

61. Hollings, *Welcome to Mars*, p. 14.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

64. Ruppelt, *RUFO*, p. 6.

65. *Ibid.*

66. A similar process can be charted regarding representations of alien visitors.

Preceding  is a family tree of-s shape, colour, t een men,' moving (illustrat 6). All come unde nce and otherm

67. 'Flyin

68. 'Sylv 952, p. 55.

69. 'Station hotels' (advertisement), *Life*, 5 January 1955, p. 50.



70. Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth Of Things In The Sky* (New York, 1997), Back Cover.

71. <http://www.abomb1.org/hiroshim/laurenc1.html> (William L. Lawrence, 'Eye Witness Account: Atomic Bomb Mission Over Nagasaki,' 9 August 1945) – accessed 29 April 2015.

72. Cynthia Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Ohio, 1999), p. 76.

73. Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, pp. 7, 9, 17.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

75. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12,762> (Harry S. Truman, 'Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,' 6 January 1947) – accessed 4 August 2014.

76. William J. Levitt quoted in Neil Postman, 'Philo Farsworth,' in Dan Rather and Walter Isaacson, *People of the Century* (New York, 1999), p. 243.

77. Jerome Clark, *The UFO Book: Encyclopedia of the Extra-terrestrial* (Detroit, 1998), p. 653. Italics in quoted passage added by the author for clarity and emphasis.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*, p. 655.

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. Susa

83. Curt New York, 1994

84. 'Was

85. Denc natural in an Age of S anion to Monster





86. Ibid.

87. See, for example, Robert Martin's 'Livernois Avenue Fights Back' in Life, 22 March 1954, p. 104, which reported on a car sales-man who accepted a flying-saucer model as trade-in and used it for advertising outside his dealership. On the phone the dealer Clyde Headrick had smoothly asked 'What model flying saucer?' and for the customer to 'bring it around for appraisal.' This story was worked into a Chevrolet advertisement, displayed in Life, 17 October 1955, p. 22, which ran the line '\$400 trade-in allowance on a flying saucer.'

88. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Mittman (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous, pp. 446-7.

89. AP, 'Mysterious Objects Whizzing Over U.S.? Officials Skeptical,' 26 June 1947.

90. Mikael Rothstein, 'The Rise and Decline of the First-Generation UFO Contactees: A Cognitive Approach,' in James R. Lewis (ed.), The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions (New York, 2003), p. 66.

91. Donald Keyhoe, The Flying Saucers Are Real (New York, 1950), pp. 5-7.

92. Hendershot, Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films, p. 127.

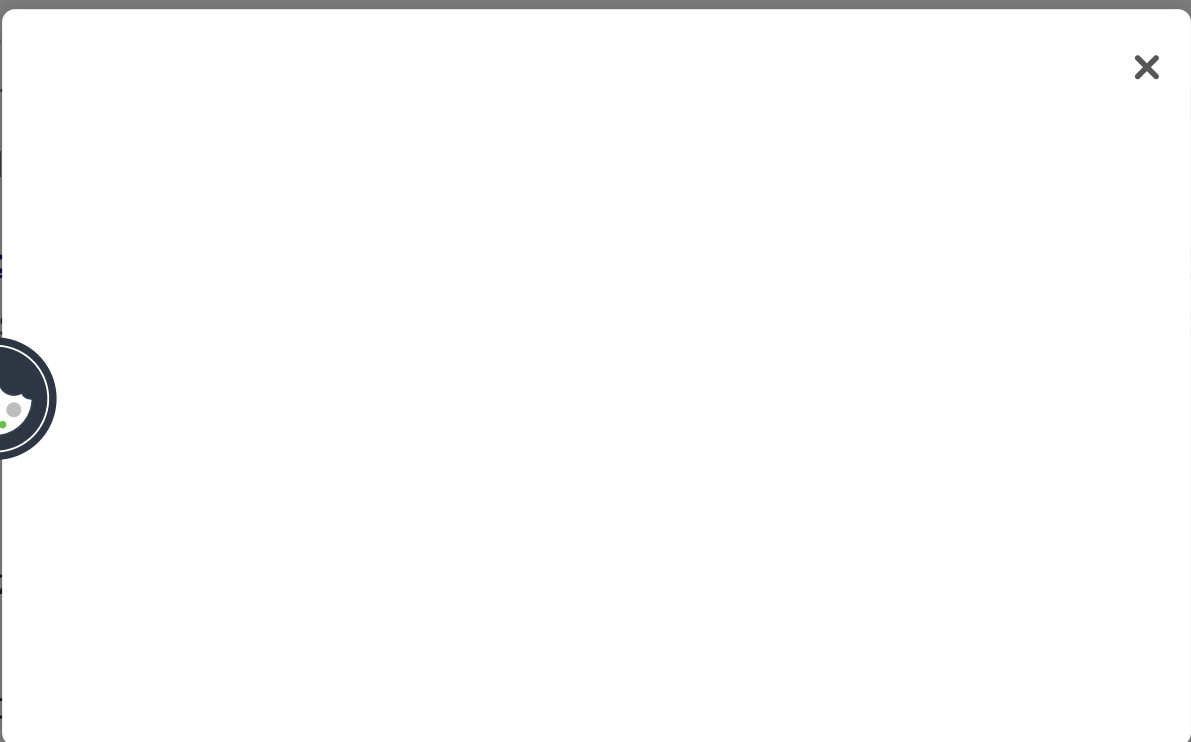
93. Keyhoe, Flying Saucers, p. 14.

94. Vern Haugland (AP), 'Air Force Denies Report Parts Of Saucers Found,' Deseret News and Tele... ng saucer in... in Matthew

95. <http://...> tml  
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96. Ibid.

97. Men... Donald... (53). Project... Blue Boc...



[temperature change] or 'meteors coupled with the normal excitement of witnesses' (Clark, *The UFO Book*, p. 661).

98. Robert E. Ginna Jr., 'Saucer Reactions,' *Life*, 9 June 1952, p. 20.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

100. Ralph Steiner, 'How to Expose Flying Saucers,' *Popular Science*, January 1953, p. 227.

101. INS, 'Saucer Story Hit By Expert,' *Miami News*, 13 February 1951, p. 1A.

102. 'Have We Visitors From Space?' *Life*, 7 April 1952, p. 82.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

105. 'Out Of This World,' *Life*, 9 January 1950, p. 24.

106. 'What Were The Flying Saucers? Eyewitnesses Believe They Saw Secret Craft,' *Popular Science*, August 1951, p. 74.

107. Lepselter, 'Why Rachel Isn't Buried In Her Grave: Ghosts, UFOs and a Place in the West,' in Rosenberg and Harding (eds.), *Histories of the Future*, pp. 259-60.

108. '2 More Solutions To Flying Saucer Puzzle Won't Hurt,' *Billboard*, 26 July 1947, p. 82.

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111. The Those Flying  
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